

Rep. Zoe Lofgren (CA-18) Testimony
Member Day Hearing for FY2024 House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Energy and Water Development and Related Agencies

Chair Fleischman, Ranking Member Kaptur, and members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony today and for your work as the Subcommittee prepares Fiscal Year 2024 legislation. As you craft proposals, I strongly urge the Subcommittee to support Community Project Funding for the Pajaro River Flood Risk Management Project.

This project is a critical infrastructure investment. The current levees on the Pajaro River are inadequate to protect the disadvantaged communities of Pajaro, Watsonville, and surrounding agricultural land. In fact, the levees have provided some of the lowest levels of flood protection of any federal flood control project in the state since they were completed in 1949.

Tragically, two weeks ago, on the morning of March 11, the levees were breached following heavy precipitation from atmospheric rivers that have pummeled the state. Although damages are still being tallied, we already know that the resulting flooding cost hundreds of millions of dollars in agricultural losses, forced the weeks-long evacuation of thousands of Pajaro residents, required hundreds of water rescues, and destroyed homes in Pajaro.

I recently toured the levee and met with families who were displaced. The floods that followed the breach devastated the community and caused extreme hardship for many families. Among those who suffered some of the most catastrophic losses were farmworkers who ensure our country's agricultural goods make it to market and the nation remains fed. Even as they begin to

repair and rebuild, the community faces the unacceptably high risk of flooding as atmospheric rivers continue to pound this area even as we meet today.

The March 2023 flooding is the fifth major flood that the town of Pajaro has reported experiencing since the levees were built in 1949. For too long, the community of Pajaro has shouldered the impacts of our failing infrastructure and our lagging response to it.

While I'm grateful that funding was recently secured to upgrade the levees to 100-year flood protection, thanks in part to the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, construction is not scheduled to start until 2025. The disadvantaged communities of Pajaro and Watsonville should not wait another two years and risk further devastating flooding as they wait for the federal government to complete upgrades that were originally authorized more than 50 years ago.

The Army Corps now estimates that it has the capability to use additional FY24 funding to begin the levee upgrades sooner using design-build techniques. Community Project Funding would fund the project to completion and potentially allow for additional efficiencies, such as the improved build techniques and the issuance of multiple contracts per construction season so that multiple sections can be constructed simultaneously.

The project has widespread community support, including from local, county, and state elected officials and community organizations. Rep. Panetta (CA-19) also asked that I share the following statement in support:

“For far too long, the protocol for prioritizing federal funding led to the delay in the construction of the Pajaro River Flood Risk Management Project, which also has contributed to the vulnerability of the communities and agriculture around the Pajaro River. The outdated Benefit-Cost-Ratio (BCR) used by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to determine its project priorities contributed to the lack of real federal funding for this project until last year. Although I was able to secure significant federal funding through the appropriations process to plan and design the project and through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to construct a major portion of the project, it has yet to be started and built. Moreover, the recent breach in the levee of the Pajaro River that resulted in the flooding and devastation in the town of Pajaro demonstrates that now more than ever this project needs more federal funding to get started. I support the request by Representative Lofgren for community project funding for the Pajaro Flood Risk Management Project so that we can begin this project soon in order to secure the vulnerable communities and invaluable agriculture surrounding the Pajaro River.”

Thank you for your consideration of this request that is so crucial to the health and safety of the communities of Watsonville and Pajaro.